

Building Relationships With Young Children

by George Scarlett

To say building relationships with young children is important seems so obvious as to be hardly worth mentioning — and that is the problem. It is so obvious that we don't give it much thought; don't go into what it really takes to build relationships, and so, don't often try to fully understand what it takes to build relationships with children. It's not that we are lazy or don't care. It's that the obvious deadens our normally curious nature, and makes us content to simply mouth the truth that building relationships matters. Here, then, I will try to make us uncomfortable about this subject that normally makes us feel downright cozy.

Building relationships with young children matters because without relationships, young children cannot thrive. Without relationships, even their physical health is at risk. There is a story about the pediatrician and former physician-in-chief at Boston's Children's Hospital, Charles Janeway, who sent a sick child home because the separation, not some medical condition, was what was undermining the child's health.

However, teachers can't solve problems by sending children home. Teachers have to build strong positive relationships with children — and for different reasons than maintaining children's physical health. Teachers have to build relationships with children so that children feel secure enough to learn and motivated enough to be cooperative and exert self-control.



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With respect to young children feeling secure, most of the talk about security has been about attachment to parents. However, in any given situation where young children find themselves without a parent, some other adult will suffice so long as that adult meets requirements for being an attachment figure (Kaye, 1982).

What are those requirements? Happily, they are just a few, ones that are attainable by anyone who is reasonably sensitive to the needs of young children. First, there is being available. To be an attachment figure, adults need to be *on call* and available when children want or need them — that means being emotionally available as well as physically there.

Second, and this is harder to realize, adults need to understand that attachments are fostered by a variety of small acts other than by making physical contact. That is, in early childhood, attachment is not simply or mainly about physical contact and being held. It is about someone noticing what a child is doing and understanding a child's goals ("I see you making a green curvy line!"). It is about providing help when help is desired and needed ("You want help tying your shoes? Okay, but let's do it together."). It is about being an ally when trouble arises ("You say Billy took your marker. Let's go have a chat with Billy."). Fostering and maintaining positive attachments with young children means, then, doing a variety of little things we may normally do but without thinking of them as fostering attachments.

With respect to young children being motivated enough to cooperate with adults and exert self-control, positive relationships with teachers are essential. First of all, positive relationships provide needed leverage for making occasional demands on a child to behave. Young children aren't inclined to cooperate when they don't care about their

relationships with adults. Why should they? What, really, have they got to lose? Time-outs and harsh words are nothing compared to losing the approval of someone who matters. And so, when adults build up positive relationships with children, they help children care about what adults want for and from them. One of the seldom understood truths in behavior management is the truth that you can be tougher on psychologically healthy children with whom you have close relationships than on those who are less healthy, more disruptive, and more distant — precisely because the healthier children care about what you think of them. For those children who don't care, we need to work hard to help them discover the many positive benefits of having a close relationship with an adult who cares.

Mentioning behavior management and challenging children bring us to the more difficult aspects of building positive relationships with children. With challenging children, we can do all the little things previously mentioned (giving attention, providing help, etc.) and still not succeed in fostering strong, positive relationships. With some, we need to do much more — particularly by communicating better and by managing dilemmas.

With respect to communicating better, today's diverse classrooms require teachers to become much more adept at communicating differently depending on the child. Some children take a friendly and reasonable way of communicating as a license to misbehave. Others take any hint at sternness as an indication that an adult is mean. Today's teachers need, then, to figure out what their ways of communicating mean to each and every child — and adjust their ways to meet the needs and meanings of each child. When it comes to communicating and relationship building, one size definitely does not fit all.

This fact hit home to me when listening to my colleague, Cindy Ballenger, talk about her struggles to build relationships and manage the normal behavior problems of the Haitian children in her charge (Ballenger, 1998). Cindy was failing as their teacher and needed to learn the Haitian way of communicating with her Haitian children when they were occasionally disruptive or out-of-control. Typical, North American ways of communicating were useless. Furthermore, she needed to learn not just the words used by Haitian parents and teachers but also the tone and physical posture they used to convey both firmness and care. Specifically, she needed to learn how, in the face of misbehavior, she could

pose a series of rhetorical questions often used by Haitian teachers — “Is this the way you act at home?”; “Does your mother let you run around indoors knocking over things?”; “Does your father let you talk mean to other kids?” and so forth. It took time and effort and guidance from Haitian teachers for Cindy to learn; but when she did learn, there were no more problems getting her Haitian children to cooperate.

This is just one of many examples of the challenges facing today's teachers when having to communicate and maintain positive relationships with a diverse group of children. Truly, our being such a diverse nation has made the job of teaching incredibly challenging — even as it has made it more rewarding.

However, perhaps the greatest challenge in building and maintaining positive relationships is the challenge to manage the dilemmas that come with managing behavior problems. In particular, there is the problem of maintaining safety and order for the short-term without undermining the relationships that are needed if children are to thrive in the long-term. To be a good teacher (or parent, for that matter) is, then, to stay always caught in this dilemma rather than to opt for one extreme or the other.

Happily, there are a variety of ways to manage this short-term vs. long-term dilemma. For example, wise teachers become proactive by implementing tactics that prevent behavior problems and reduce the need to use heavy-handed ways to control children, ways that might undermine their relationships. They do so by implementing good classroom routines, by having rules that the children have helped construct themselves, and by implementing curricular activities that interest children and promote constructive activity.

Wise teachers also react to problem behavior with tactics that preserve their positive relationships with children. For example, often one hears an experienced and wise teacher reframing just prior to setting a limit. I once heard such a teacher telling an impulsive little boy who had just grabbed an audiotape and was about to destroy it, “My you have quick hands!” Only then did she proceed to get him to handle the tape more carefully. These and other tactics say to a child, “Even though I am setting a limit and steering you in a direction different from where you were headed, I still like you and care for you.”

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

Another such tactic is what I call relationship referencing. Moments of misbehavior can present opportunities to refer to one's relationship with a child. For example, getting pleasure from being devilish, one little boy liked to run away from circle time. However, he stopped running away after his teacher said, "When you run away I don't get to hear all those interesting things you have to say — like yesterday when you were telling us all about dinosaurs. That was really interesting." In other words, this teacher found a way to tie this child's disruptive behavior to something positive about her relationship with the child.

These and other ways of maintaining positive relationships are needed by the boatload — so teachers need to stock up on tactics even as they adopt a relationship building approach to teaching. The distinction is important. An approach refers to one's overall framework for thinking about what supports young children and their development. Tactics are particular actions that one employs with particular children in particular situations. Confusing the two can put unnecessary limits on acquiring new tactics — or it can make us lose track of the goals that really matter. Relationship building is central to the

approach I have been discussing. It is the goal that really matters.

One last word with respect to this issue of building relationships with young children. You may have noticed that I have not mentioned self-esteem. I have not done so on purpose. Self-esteem need not be the focus when working with young children. In early childhood, the focus needs to be on relationship building. For young children, having close, positive relationships with adults fosters self-esteem naturally. Interesting how esteem for oneself is not the central issue in early childhood. Perhaps there is a lesson here for all of us.

References

- Ballenger, C. (1998). "Culture and behavior problems: The language of control." In W. G. Scarlett and Associates. *Trouble in the classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Kaye, K. (1982). *The mental and social life of babies: How parents create persons*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

It's All the Rage! Scarlett talks in this article about building relationships as crucial to children's effective functioning — repeating the mantra of brain researchers and theorists throughout the early childhood education and development field. Then he provides a footprint for how to do it. Using the suggestions in the article (i.e., being available, fostering attachment, improving communication, managing dilemmas, implementing good classroom routine, etc.), ask teachers to self-assess their abilities in doing each of the skills and to create suggestions for each child in their classrooms. Then, ask them to work in teaching teams to improve skills and tactics as well as their overall relationship building approach in the classroom.

Boatloads of Ideas: Teachers know that Scarlett is right — they need boatloads of tactics in order to build relationships with children. This is the perfect opportunity to let teachers tell their stories of the unique and different strategies they have for building relationships with children. Ask teachers to write a brief description of a specific example of relationship building with one child from their past experience. Then, let teachers share their stories with each other. Analyze the tactic, strategy, technique, or activity in the given situation for applicability to relationship building that is going on right now in teachers' classrooms.

Fine-tuning Communication: This one lends itself perfectly to paired/shared observation. Find ways to give teachers opportunities to observe each other in action building relationships in the classroom without the responsibility of managing children (in other words, provide a substitute!). Facilitate a discussion with the team about what they learned, ideas they would like to borrow or add to their own relationship building, and suggestions for modifying or fine tuning communication to improve current relationships. Repeat this experience on a regular, perhaps quarterly, basis.